

INTRODUCTION

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Paludes, entitled *Les Nourritures terrestres*, is a handbook of revolt and a hymn to freedom. Breaking forth from the cloistered walls within which French literature was becoming ever more hermetic, Andre Gide instinctively voiced the message of Nietzsche and Walt Whitman and expressed more emphatically than had Pater or Wilde the doctrine of supreme individualism. While the very popular Maurice Barres was teaching the need of rooting oneself firmly in one's native soil and keeping close contact with one's traditions, Andre Gide exhorted his reader: *. . . and when you have read me, throw this book away—and go out. I should like it to have made you want to get away — away from anywhere, from your town, from your family, from your room, from your thought."

As the *Journals* clearly indicate, the *fin-de-siecle* combination of persuasive prose and ejaculatory verse that made up *Les Nourritures terrestres* failed to reach a large public in 1897, when the work first appeared. But the fact remains that, in addition to marking the turning-point in its author's career, it struck the note of the future since, twenty years later, this little book preaching the cult of unrest and ardor with the attendant glorification of desire and spontaneity came to be the chief agent of that Gidian influence which to conservative critics has seemed nothing less than diabolical. It is dangerous indeed to describe "the savage and sudden savor of life*" and to urge people to "act without judging whether the deed is good or evil." Many youths found in this volume a justification for indulging their worst instincts, but this is perhaps the inevitable result of freeing people. Had they shared the author's background, they would have been aware also of a more sober current in the book and noted the exhortation: "Let everyone follow his

inclination . . . provided he go upward." In recent years Andr  Gide himself has judged the work harshly on the basis of style and because of the misunderstandings to which it has given rise. But as the journal entry for 18 April 1928 states: "My writings can be compared to Achilles* spear, with which a second contact cured those it had first wounded. If one of my books disconcerts you, reread it; under the obvious poison I took care to hide the antidote; each one of them aims less to disturb than to warn."

Paludes in 1895 had showed Gide's associates to what an extent they were prisoners of their habits, their ideas, and even their emotions; two years later *Les Nourritures terrestres* was an urgent call to freedom. But as if the author felt that on this occasion the antidote deserved more attention and better labeling, he was for some time to devote himself to clarifying his message —as much in his own mind as in that of the reader.

1 "To free oneself is nothing; it's being free that is hard," says Michel of *L'Immoraliste*. This is the problem that Andr  Gide examines from